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ABSTRACT

A college level unit which investigates stereotypes of aging in the United States is described. The three-class unit serves as an introduction to the study of social gerontology. Its purpose is to address issues of negative stereotypes of old age reinforced by the media and by our cultural roots; the lack of knowledge about the normal changes that occur with age; and the special responsibility of the media to portray an informative and realistic picture of all groups and life stages. During the first class, students define and discuss commonly accepted stereotypes. Class two focuses on how the media reinforces negative stereotypes in children's books, popular magazine cartoons and advertisements, short stories, television, films, and poetry. Students analyze slides of magazine advertisements to determine projected images, reinforced stereotypes, and implied messages about old age and discuss how the message could be written to portray a more realistic image. The final class period is a presentation of the factual realities of aging. Emphasis is placed on the diverse realities of old age in the United States. (KC)

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GROWING OLD IN PUBLIC:

A MODULAR TEACHING UNIT ON STEREOTYPES

A PAPER PRESENTED TO

THE SIXTH ANNUAL CONVENTION

THE ASSOCIATION FOR GERONTOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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GRAY HAIR! SHE WAS HORRIFIED.

A woman gazes into her mirror with dismay. Gray streaks mar the beauty of her hair. "Is my youthful appearance going? Am I to look old?" Later she sees in the mirror an amazing change. The original color has returned. She is young again. A clean colorless liquid has brought a wonderful and gratifying transformation.

Kolor Bak Liquid Advertisement, 1923

DO YOU LOOK LIKE YOUR MOTHER TOO SOON?

WOULD HE LIKE A YOUNGER LOOKING WIFE?

WHEN DID YOU BEGIN TO LOOK LIKE AN OLDER WOMAN?

Oil of Olay Advertisements, 1980

Public images of old age which define youth as ideal beauty, those which encourage fear or denial of age, and those which perpetuate stereotypes of the older person as sickly or rocking chair-bound are predominant in the mass media. Recent studies show that the negative and stereotypical portrayal of old age can be seen in children's books (Ansello, 1976), popular magazine fiction (Martel, 1968), prime-time television (Aronhoff, 1974; Harris, 1977), motion pictures (Wolfenstein, 1950), magazine cartoons (Smith, 1979), and poetry (Sohngen, 1978). Preliminary results from my study of popular magazine advertisements reveal that the aging process and the visible signs of aging are often portrayed as something to be avoided, however, older persons are frequently pictured in a more positive light.

Emphasis on negative images reflect current social attitudes as well as uninformed and stereotypical thinking at all levels of the mass media. Advertisers consciously play upon the individual's fear of aging or attempt to sell youthful self-images. The public image of old age portrayed in various media

is an important concern as it undoubtedly affects American attitudes about growing old and the self-concept of the elderly.

In the distant past, a few public images were selected by the elite to make the social order understandable to illiterate masses. In our own times, thousands of images are constantly projected by mass media and subconsciously consumed by the public. In his important study of images, Kenneth Boulding points out that individual and cultural attitudes are predicated on an image or mental picture of the world. Relatively fixed pictures of the world and the diverse groups of people who compose it help us to categorize an infinite number of sensory impressions and experiences (Boulding, 1956). Gordon Allport argues that categorization is a necessary characteristic of the human mind although it inevitably leads to stereotypical thinking (Allport, 1958). According to Allport,

> ...stereotypes may or may not originate in a kernal of truth; they aid people in simplifying their categories; they justify hostility; sometimes they serve as projection screens for our personal conflict. But there is an additional, and exceedingly important, reason for their existence. They are socially supported, continually revived and hammered in by our media of mass communication - by novels, short stories, newspaper items, movies, stage, radio, and television.

Negative stereotypes of old age are reinforced by other cultural influences besides the communications industry. We live in a society that has its roots in the Greek ideal which places youth and qualities associated with youthfulness on a pedestal. Since Ponce de Leon's voyage to the New World youth has been identified with beauty, strength, vitality, hope, progress, and the future. It should not be surprising that advertising campaigns for products ranging from cosmetic creams to hair dyes should emphasize the importance of a youthful appearance. Fear of aging and the equation of youth with beauty is particularly aimed towards women although similar themes are now beginning to appear in advertisements directed towards men.

Lack of knowledge about the normal changes that occur with age increases fear, denial, and stereotyping. The absence of a fully integrated curriculum on aging in elementary and high schools is only now receiving the attention it deserves by educational gerontologists. The segregation of older persons in inner cities, high-rise apartment buildings, retirement cities, and nursing homes decreases intergenerational experiences and further limits understanding of aging. In their national survey, Louis Harris and Associates reported that American attitudes on aging were primarily based on negative stereotypes (Harris, 1975).

Although stereotypical images of old age may be inevitable for some individuals, their perpetuation by the mass media is not. During the past two decades various minority groups have protested stereotyped portrayal and generally the media have become more sensitive. Unfortunately, enlightenment has not yet spread to media treatment of the elderly, despite recent studies and efforts by the Gray Panthers' "media watch." Because of their pervasiveness and unavoidable intrusion on our daily lives, the media have a special responsibility to portray an informative and realistic picture of all groups and life stages.

These complex issues should be included in courses on social gerontology. Many introductory courses and texts include a short unit on major stereotypes; however, they often ignore underlying causes or techniques for change. Since 1975 I have experimented with a broader teaching unit on stereotypes that has stimulated significant student interest and proven to be an effective method for introducing the study of social gerontology.

GC 1-234, Growing Old Together: Aging in The Twentieth Century is the introductory course in the University of Minnesota's newly developed undergraduate certificate program in aging studies (Detzner, 1979). Students aged seven-

teen to seventy-eight with educational backgrounds varying from the high school diploma to the masters degree have taken this course in socio-cultural gerontology. Many students have extensive work or volunteer experience with the elderly in nursing homes, high-rise apartment complexes, senior centers, congregate dining sites, and other settings. The diversity of students makes this class particularly exciting and challenging to teach.

One of the major course objectives is to encourage students to recognize their own images of aging as well as the socially reinforced stereotypes portrayed by the mass media. To accomplish this goal, a three-hour class unit has been developed. This teaching module can be easily adapted to other gerontology courses for students from the high school to the post graduate levels and for off-campus lectures to groups such as social services workers, the elderly, and the general public.

Before discussing stereotypes, the major theories of social gerontology are introduced. These lectures emphasize the diversity of aging experiences amongst the twenty-three million persons in the United States who are over sixty-five. An understanding of pluralism helps to set the stage for an examination of student images and social stereotypes.

Class One

During the first class hour students are involved in a discussion of commonly accepted stereotypes. To provide structure for this discussion, Allport's definitions of stereotype are introduced including the the following basic elements:

Stereotypes are exaggerated, categorical beliefs about a specific group.

They are usually based on misconceptions, prejudgment, or overcategorization.

Stereotyped groups usually have some visible and conspicuous feature. Sterotypes can be favorable or unfavorable.

Experience has shown that most people are reluctant to publicly reveal their own stereotypes about old age, especially in a class on gerontology. Instead students are asked to suggest some of the most commonly believed stereotypes that they have heard others express. It is far safer to list on the blackboard stereotypes that "others" hold. Those which are most frequently mentioned are painfully familiar to all of us:

"Older people are sickly."
"They are crabby, narrow-minded, and conservative."
"Most of them are living in the past."
"You become senile with age."
"The majority of old people live in nursing homes."
"You can't teach an old dog new tricks."
"All they seem to do is play bingo or cards."
"They don't like young people."
"Prefer to live with people their own age."
"Dirty old man."

It comes as a surprise when students realize that virtually all of the common stereotypes they can suggest are negative. They are reminded that stereotypes can also be positive and encouraged to think of as many as possible. Usually there is an embarrassed silence until someone mentions the "old people are wise" stereotype. Rarely can any others be suggested. The recognition that the dominant stereotypes of old age are overwhelmingly negative stimulates many questions and a lively discussion. Students begin to understand why so many Americans fear or deny their own aging process and why the majority of persons over sixty-five refuse to define themselves as "old" (Tuckman, 1957).

A recurring question concerns the reasons for this rather bleak picture of the later years. At this time the instructor can introduce some of the expla-

nations for this particularly American phenomenon:

1. Many people lack knowledge about normal aging because of its absence in curriculum and because they lack sufficient contact with diverse groups of older persons.

2. Gray hair, wrinkles, age spots and other physical differences make older people a visibly identifiable group which encourages over-categorization.

3. Personal fear of growing older and death encourages some to reject those persons who remind them of their physical limits and ultimate mortality.

4. The cultural predominance of youthful values.

5. The negative image of the aging process and the aged is consistently reinforced by all forms of the mass media.

Class Two

To illustrate how the media reinforces negative stereotypes some of the basic research on this topic is introduced. Studies show that predominantly negative images of the aging process and bleak pictures of old age are found in childrens books, popular magazine cartoons and short stories, prime time television, films, and poetry. Old age is seen as a process of physical, psychological, and social decline. Older people often have no important roles or social responsibilities, they are anxious, lonely, sick or sitting in a rocking chair waiting for the end. Our conscious and subconscious images of growing old, already predisposed by negative cultural influences and socialization, are regularly reinforced by a constant barrage of negativism. These images are particularly harmful to the self-image of the elderly and to those who have little or no regular contact with them.

An additional source of media influence and stereotyping, not previously studied, is popular magazine advertising. A large percentage of advertisements which mention old age, portray an older person, or promote products which alter the visible signs of aging are particularly blatant and ageist. The negative

images portrayed by all other media are often the result of the subconscious stereotypes of their creators. Magazine ads, however, are consciously created by sophisticated motivational analysts whose purpose is to identify a product with a specific self-image or subconscious need of the consumer. Products such as hair dyes and wrinkle creams are designed and packaged to help consumers deal with fear, anxiety, hostility, inner tensions, and guilt (Packard, 1957).

One of the most obvious examples is the multi-million dollar advertising campaign of the Oil of Olay Company which focuses on women's fear and denial of aging. For almost ten years this company has encouraged middle aged women to purchase their product in order to retain youthful appearances. Because of their success dozens of other products have used similar themes and images. Another example are advertisements for nutritional products, constipation, arthritis pain, and various medications which help reinforce the "older people are sickly" stereotype. Virtually every one of the other commonly held stereotypes that students mentioned in the first class is publically reinforced by a magazine advertising campaign.

During the last few years a more positive image of aging has begun to appear in mass advertising. We now see ads for products that enhance and highlight graying hair. These "gray is beautiful" products provide a welcome counterpoint to the negative pictures which continue to predominate. Another positive theme is the "older person as the voice of experience" campaigns which are increasingly used by advertisers to sell everything from soup to coffee. Where we used to see a young housewife explaining the advantages of a product we now see older relatives or friends extolling its qualities to the inexperienced housewife. Telephone utilities, oil companies, Amtrak, airlines, and even the United States postal service have begun to encourage consumers to use

their services to brighten the lives of older relatives. These newly emerging images indicates the beginning of a change in attitude amongst advertisers that may have beneficial effects on mass attitudes.

To dramatize advertising stereotypes and the changing image a slide presentation is made during the second class period. Color slides are produced by photographing a variety of advertisements that have been clipped from major popular magazines. Slides should be organized to show examples of various stereotypes and grouped by categories and products. My one hundred and twenty slides have been refined during the last five years to include particularly good visual examples. The slide presentation usually takes between thirty and forty minutes and should allow time for students to analyze the subtle messages of several advertisements. Students will recognize many of the ads but often they understand the message for the first time. When so many familiar ads with similar themes are shown together the media's reinforcement of stereotypical thinking becomes obvious and disturbing to most students.

As a way of further sensitizing students to this lesson an assignment is given to be turned in the following class session. Students are asked to find an image of old age in a popular magazine advertisement, clip it, and answer several questions in a short paper. The best examples can be kept by the instructor to improve and refine the slide presentation for future classes. Students are asked to answer the following questions:

1. What makes the advertisement a positive, negative, neutral, or mixed image of old age?
2. What stereotypes are projected or reinforced by the advertisement if any?

3. What is the message about old age which this ad implies or suggests?
4. If the message is negative how would you rewrite it to portray a more realistic or positive image?

Class Three

The final class period is devoted to a discussion of the student assignment and presentation of factual material on the realities of aging. Students often report surprise at the relatively small number of older persons portrayed in popular magazines. We interpret ads they have found and suggest alternative ways of writing them. Other methods for changing the predominant images are explored. Some of the typical suggestions are:

Boycott products which stereotype the elderly;

Encourage various media to include more factual information on normal aging and more positive examples of older people;

Develop intergenerational projects that bring older people together with younger people;

Provide living testimony to the positive diversity of age by continuing to grow and create throughout your own lifespan.

One group of students wrote an angry letter to the Olay Company protesting their advertising campaign and received a form letter and sample in return. Another group produced and sold bumper stickers which proclaimed:

PEOPLE ARE LIKE WINE

BETTER WITH AGE

In the class time which remains a brief presentation of some basic information is made. The quality of the elderly's physical and mental health is described as well as family, ethnic, and economic data. Emphasis is placed on the diverse realities of old age in the United States. This short presentation is followed by reading assignments in the text which develops this infor-

mation in greater depth.

Student evaluations of the unit on stereotypes have been consistently positive. They like the combination of class discussion, slide presentation, short lectures, and written assignment. Students report that the unit caused them to examine their own images and stereotypes of aging and it made them become highly sensitive to media portrayal of the aged. Some representative comments about the unit:

> "Good because it got each student actively involved in evaluating images of older people in the media."
>
> "I will always be conscious of this every time I see a picture of an older person or a commercial on TV."
>
> "Made us aware of how older people are exploited and not really understood."
>
> "A good method for introduction of issues to the class."

Besides helping students to recognize stereotypes of old age this unit sets the stage for the rest of my course. As we examine major topics of social gerontology students often refer back to our earlier discussions of stereotypes. They are eager to learn as much as possible about the realities of life for the nation's elderly because they are anxious to overcome the stereotypical thinking which predominates in the United States.

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